

Allen Ginsberg and the 60's

Morris Dickstein

A generation is fashion: but there is more to history than costume and jargon. The people of an era must either carry the burden of change assigned to their time or die under its weight in the wilderness.

—Harold Rosenberg
"Death in the Wilderness"

IT WAS almost two years ago, in the shabby auditorum of Columbia's Earl Hall, with its high crumbling plaster dome, that I last heard Allen Ginsberg read his poems. He and John Hollander were back where they had both gone to school twenty years earlier, doing a benefit for a campus literary magazine. It was an intriguing combination. I knew from Hollander's fine poem "Helicon" that they had been friends then, in a strange, intense, and perhaps mistrusting way. I also knew how archetypically their lives had since diverged. There was almost a cultural parable here: could any two closely contemporary poets have come to public notice more differently? For Hollander there had been *Partisan Review*, a Yale Younger Poets award (carrying Auden's sponsorship, for a very Audenesque book), and a successful academic career. For Ginsberg there had been San Francisco and the notoriety of *Howl*, cheap exploitation in *Time* and olympian put-down in *Partisan Review* (by Hollander among others).

Times had changed however. Instead of canzoni, sestinas (!), madrigals, songs, and sonnets, Hollander had published an impressive

sequence of autobiographical poems, some almost as free and personal as anything Ginsberg had written. And Ginsberg, as far as I knew, might not have written any poems for years. None of his books contained anything from after 1960. Perhaps alone among the Beat poets he had survived, magnificently—that much was clear. But as I had followed his gentle, newly-bearded eminence from week to week in the pages of the *Village Voice* he seemed to have become entirely a public figure, the guru to a new generation. It was not as a poet, it seemed, that he lent his magnetic spiritual presence to so many of the most obscene and solemn moments of the 1960's, from New York to Berkeley and London to Prague; he was the elder statesman, the wise and worldly Lord of the Revels, a live link with the germinal protest culture of the 50's.

So it was the performer, the public Ginsberg, that many came to see, see even more than hear, that night in Earl Hall. Nor was anyone disappointed, not by either poet. The surprise was how close Hollander came to stealing the show. For all his change of style he remained the complete university poet in the best sense: witty, literate, brilliant, breathlessly enthusiastic yet ironical. The crowd had not come for *him* perhaps but they were his nonetheless; he knew their stops, he could sound them from top to bottom. When sustained applause finally demanded an encore he asked for Ginsberg's permission to read "Helicon." It was a touching gesture, and the poem itself was wildly received. Those in the audience, who had seen the two embrace when they first met on the stage, who perhaps did not

know that Hollander had once dismissed *Howl* as a "dreadful little volume" exhibiting an "utter lack of decorum of any kind,"* understood intuitively that "Helicon" was a peace offering, a love poem and more—a propitiation of part of himself and his generation.

GINSBERG, who followed, seemed by comparison insensitive to his listeners or determined to throw them off balance. He began by chanting rather than reading, and as the *Hare Krishnas* went on, longer than anyone imagined they could, it seemed possible that he had sloughed off language entirely. There was Allen Ginsberg, ecstatic and uncool, apparently oblivious to us, doing his spiritual push-ups in public. It was troubling, and needless to say it worked its effect; gradually, grudgingly, we gave up that air of facetiousness and sophistication endemic to every college audience. Ginsberg was there not to please us but to convert us.

But the greater surprise, for me at least, was yet to come: poems, many of them, some better than anything he'd previously written. A number were funny, closer to the comic self-ironies of Hollander than to the transports we had just witnessed or the prophetic intensities of *Howl* and *Kaddish*. Had I forgotten, or never noticed, the Ginsberg of "To Aunt Rose" and "America" and "The Lion for Real," bittersweet parables at once madcap and sentimental? Well, here was "This form of Life needs Sex," in which the man who had shocked television interviewers by introducing Peter Orlovsky as his spouse explored his new interest in women and procreation.

There was more, poems too various to be classified, and when *Planet News: 1961-1967* was published a year ago they were there on the page, they hadn't evaporated.† Ginsberg had survived as a poet too, as a poet above all.

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* *Partisan Review*, Spring 1957.

† City Lights Books, 144 pp., \$2.00.

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One wouldn't know it from the scant critical attention it received, but *Planet News* was one of the richest, meatiest offerings of the decade, no relic of the Beat movement, no longer marginal, but close to the center of a new literary consciousness. This is no doubt the secret tribute of "Helicon," home of the muses, where a young Ginsberg, the siren-like Virgil, guides a younger Hollander, his half-willing Dante, down to a modern underground, to St. Luke's Hospital to sell his own blood: the springs of inspiration run deep, deeper than the virtuosity of Campion or Auden could suggest. "And I know," the now-older Hollander concludes,

*That opening up at all is harder
than meeting a measure:
With night coming on like a
death, a ruby of blood is a
treasure.*

Ginsberg had won what once seemed merely a battle of anthologies. Academic poetry and its sisters, the precious, claustral closet-novel and the well-made Jamesian short story were as moribund as the polite essay, though some of their practitioners didn't know it. More than literary form had been at stake; it was the direction of our consciousness and culture. The Beat movement died too—Ginsberg himself thought it already dead in 1961 when he took off, for most of four years as it turned out,* "to fade awhile in the Orient"—but the dramatic turn American culture took around that time ushered in its unexpected legacy. Eventually the San Francisco story became a national story; a new culture was born in which the Beat life style and art styles became widely diffused. The paranoia of the middle-aged proved justified. *Now they are everywhere!*

WHAT HAPPENED in the 60's? It's all too early to say, it's still happening, but one can make a tentative and personal inventory. Some have already tried. Admirers and critics both detect a "new sensibility," and sometimes even agree in their accounts of it. Susan Sontag describes the new sensibility as a redemption of the senses from the mind, and consequently the dis-

placement of literature, with its "heavy burden of 'content,' both reportage and moral judgment," by arts "with much less content, and a much cooler mode of moral judgment—like music, films, dance, architecture, painting, sculpture."† Irving Howe, perhaps the sharpest critic of the new sensibility, is only too glad to concur in this description, but finds the results shallow, escapist, and nihilistic—built upon a simplistic faith in innocence and instinct, a "psychology of unobstructed need," that is indifferent to morality and impatient with ideas.** He wonders whether such an attitude "is compatible with a high order of culture or a complex civilization." He glares sternly at those who wish to put aside the tragic burdens of the 20th century for a period of "relaxed pleasures and surface hedonism."

Now Miss Sontag and Mr. Howe can be fine critics when they have no special axe to grind; we've all learned a great deal from both of them. Polemic, however, leads them into distortion and simplification, so that they tend to confirm each other's stereotypes. Miss Sontag's essay "One Culture and the New Sensibility" is marred by a heavy-handed account of the moral and ideational content of literature. "The Matthew Arnold notion of culture," she says, "defines art as a criticism of life—this being understood as the propounding of moral, social, and political ideas" (which literature does in a "gross" way, with "discursive explicitness").

Parts of Irving Howe's essay perversely approximate this caricature of the traditional idea of culture. This sometime Marxist declares a *Kulturkampf* in defense of absolute "moral imperatives" and calls upon "traditional Christianity and modern Freudianism" to testify to the original sin of our biological natures. Like the Defender of the Faith of some severe humanist church he examines and rejects the moral credentials of Norman Brown, Marcuse, McLuhan, the New Left, the *New York Review*, the Columbia students, drug-takers, Robert Brustein and his "theatrical grope-ins" (no point in making distinctions here, as Brustein did),

Miss Sontag, Fiedler, Mailer, et al. Speaking for a complexity of consciousness ("the idea of the problematic," "nuance and ambiguity," etc.) and against simplistic "neoprimitivism," he collapses everything together, tars everyone with the same brush. One hadn't known that contemporary culture was so much of a piece.

WHAT IS THERE about the new sensibility that could drive an old radical into the arms of the church, so to speak? It's clear that this sensibility, far from being cool and content-less, has much to do with politics, morals, and even religion. This is where Allen Ginsberg comes in, as a problem perhaps, and an occasion. Howe would probably dismiss him with the immoralists and the drug-takers. (Even Leslie Fiedler gets associated with the pot-heads because he wrote an essay that failed to condemn them. Woe unto those who actually turn on!) Yet Ginsberg doesn't readily fit Miss Sontag's qualifications either. He not only publishes unashamed *literature*, but he is too preachy, speaks too directly to our moral and emotional sensibilities.

In Ginsberg we can make out some of the traditional roots of the "new" culture of the 60's. He himself has been at pains to enlarge our sense of the poetic tradition, and to underline his affinities with Blake, Whitman, Rimbaud, William Carlos Williams, and other poets who found little favor in the academy during the 40's and 50's ("Before I met Williams," Jane Kramer quotes him as saying, "I was all hung up on cats like Wyatt Surrey, and Donne. I'd read them and then copy down what I thought poetry like theirs would be. Then I sent some of those poems to Wil-

* I learned this and much else about Ginsberg from Jane Kramer's charming and insightful book *Allen Ginsberg in America*, Random House, 202 pp., \$4.95. Much of it first appeared as a two-part *New Yorker* essay. This profile should be supplemented by the hard-edged and tough-minded Ginsberg who appears in an interview with Paul Carroll in *Playboy* (April 1969).

† "One Culture and the New Sensibility," the concluding essay in *Against Interpretation*.

** "The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle & a Critique," COMMENTARY (October 1968).

liams, and he thought that they were terrible. . . . He told me, 'Listen to the rhythm of your own voice. Proceed intuitively by ear.'")

BUT GINSBERG belongs to other traditions as well. It was the singular virtue of Diana Trilling's condescending essay on Ginsberg at Columbia to treat him not as a crazy visionary or an irresponsible dropout but as the remnant of an evangelical left-wing culture of the 30's.* His poem "America" is full of sentimental invocations of the Wobblies, Tom Mooney, the Spanish Loyalists, the Scottsboro boys, Sacco and Vanzetti, all set in an ironic 50's context.

*America when will you be angelic?
When will you take off your
clothes?*

*When will you look at yourself
through the grave?*

*When will you be worthy of your
million Trotskyites?*

* * *

*America I used to be a communist
when I was a kid I'm not sorry.
I smoke marijuana every chance
I get.*

*I sit in my house for days on end
and stare at the roses in the closet.*

The juxtapositions are ingenious, like Blake's Proverbs of Hell. Obviously this is not agit-prop poetry; Ginsberg is also a drug-enthusiast and a visionary, not least out of disappointed political and messianic expectations. His mother was a Communist who happened to go mad, or a madwoman who once had been a Communist. The demons that haunted her fantasies were half political and half personal. Her last letter to him, which he received two days after her death and transcribed in the *Kaddish* he wrote for her, was at once visionary poetry and the stern advice of a concerned Jewish mother:

*The key is in the window, the
key is in the sunlight at the win-
dow—I have the key—Get married
Allen don't take drugs—the key
is in the bars, in the sunlight in
the window.*

*Love,
your mother*

The poignant combinations of "America" and of Naomi Ginsberg were those on which all of Ginsberg's work was based, and point to the ways he most foreshadows

and incarnates the culture of the 60's. It was only the "tranquillized" 50's (as Lowell then called it), with its stringent sense of decorum and its political complacency, that could have considered the Beat movement a drop-out culture without social or artistic point.† Even the public behavior of the Beats, which was correlative to the inertia and resistance of the age, had its forebear in the *épatisme* of Dada and the Surrealists. Now in the 60's this and many other germs blossom side by side. How did we contrive a unique mixture of 20's bohemianism and 30's politics? The young are promiscuously drawn to both Marx and the occult, Mao and the *I Ching*, politics and pot, revolution and rock. In the arts the cultural upheaval at large has opened the gates not only to sexual frankness but also to a general revival of experiment the likes of which we have not seen, at least in literature, since the first generation of modernists. (This is not to say that the experiments are as ambitious or as successful, only that we ought to take them seriously enough to make discriminations.)

If I speak of literature it is not only because I know it best or because other arts like painting, more insulated from society by their own modern aesthetic, nurtured vigorous experimental movements in the 40's and 50's, but because I can't agree with the notion popularized by McLuhan that books have been displaced. Literature, even popular literature, has always been the province of a more conscious minority. If books must now share their audience with films and politics and popular music the dispersion is a healthy one (even as far as "content" goes).** It's wrong to accuse the young of not reading and also of reading the wrong books. If they've traded in Eliot for Blake, this may be a mistake but it should cause no panic among those who once traded in Swinburne for Eliot or Shelley for Donne. I've twice conducted an undergraduate course on Blake, in which even those who came but to get high stayed to sweat out the intricacies of the system. With *The Four Zoas* in one hand and Frye's *Fear-*

ful Symmetry in the other, they could hardly be accused of intellectual laziness.

Young people in the 60's, with a great deal of sophistication, tolerance, and eagerness, have been looking for something in literature (as Pauline Kael said recently of young movie audiences), not just looking at it. Nor should we scorn their demand for relevance unless it becomes too narrow. So often misapplied, the notion of relevance has taken on a faintly comical air today, but its pitfalls are more visible in the narrowly personal literature exemplified by *The Assistant* and *Seize the Day* than in that which gave us *Catch-22* and *V.* and *Cat's Cradle*. Novelists in the 60's have recovered the gift of fantasy and imaginative excess, as well as an adventurousness of form and technique that rivals Joyce (though not without some loss, as

* "The Other Night at Columbia: A Report from the Academy," *Partisan Review*, Spring 1959.

† The social point did not begin to be heard until *Growing Up Absurd* finally found a publisher in 1960. Until then the Beats were what a famous piece in *Time* had made of them, a "pack of oddballs who celebrate booze, dope, sex, and despair." The aesthetic point took longer to get a serious hearing, though *On the Road*, unlike *Howl*, had gotten some enthusiastic middlebrow reviews when it first appeared. Serious critics remained hostile to both, and their taste in poetry was enshrined in the Pack-Hall-Simpson anthology, *New Poets of England and America*, which excluded not only the Beats but also the Black Mountain poets, the New York School, and every other note of incipient experimentalism.

Here and there in the 50's there were dissenting voices, mostly political, who assaulted the prevailing tendencies. One thinks of *Dissent* and Irving Howe's essay "This Age of Conformity," which now seems to embarrass him slightly; of Harold Rosenberg's essays, especially "Couch Liberalism and the Guilty Past" and "Death in the Wilderness"; of Richard Chase's 1958 book *The Democratic Vista*, whose best pages offered both a stinging but balanced critique of the 50's and a prescient anticipation of the new politics of the 60's. But it was only in 1959 and 1960 that the trickle became a flood, and within a short space many of the founding books of the new sensibility were published.

** Norman Podhoretz has described the urgency that attended a new novel in the 50's, even a single review of a new novel, which he traces to a "tyranny of taste" that gets out of hand in "politically quiescent periods." Which of us is nostalgic for literature to have that kind of primacy?

with Joyce himself, of direct human appeal).

The 60's novel has been a hybrid literature, a dialectical literature, like Ginsberg's poetry. Heller's *Catch-22* is an odd cross between *No Time for Sergeants* and Dostoevsky, between a joke-book and Kafka. Like Kafka's own work it is a perfect expression of the Jewish imagination of disaster, which means paranoia confirmed by history. Pynchon's *V.* combines a jazzy schlemiel-story with a staggering range of pseudo-Conradian adventures, which are scattered around the book like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle whose improbable whole takes the shape of our century; or is it just a game? Neither book proceeds directly, both harbor secrets (the secret of Snowden, the mystery of V.), both expand in widening ripples of enigma and disclosure. Similarly haunted by this sense of intricate connection and hidden meaning are Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle*, as clean and spare as a diagram, and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, where the game feels more threatening. With their cartoonish characters and weird parodic sects and conspiracies these novels walk a fine line between what Pynchon calls the "orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia" and the terrible blankness of the quotidian, between the imagination of disaster and no imagination at all. These black-humor fantasies are deeply political, not only because their Kafkaesque anxieties so fully express the sensibility of those who grew up with war and cold war, the CIA and the bomb, but because their half-mythic appropriation of large chunks of contemporary reality speaks to our political imagination as no propagandist literature could.

Take Donald Barthelme's story "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" side by side with Mailer's recent journalism. Who could have predicted that fiction and political reportage would grow together as they have in the 60's? The progress of the literary mind from the anti-Stalinist radicalism of *Partisan Review* in the 30's and 40's to Trilling's still-engaged critique of liberalism in the name of imagination in 1950 to the "tyranny of taste" and the triumph of

the New Criticism was toward an increasing disengagement from politics. Somehow Trilling's (and Matthew Arnold's) insistence that the political and literary minds had much to teach each other turned into the notion that they were fundamentally inimical, perhaps because most of the lessons flowed in one direction. Arnoldian disinterestedness came to justify a disdain for ideology and an aloofness from all political commitment, whereas in Arnold it is a mode of cultural criticism, of deeper engagement, directed above all against social complacency and self-congratulation. "Wragg is in custody," people are being quarantined and dehumanized—this is Arnold's prime example of the function of criticism.

Very much marked by this atmosphere of withdrawal, the novels of the 50's oscillated between minute personal concerns and abstract mythic ones; problems of alienation and identity were referred either to the private moral will, to the mysterious chemistry of human interaction, or to metaphysical necessity. Only the ethnic novel, rooted in a small but definable community, preserved a remnant of the social substance of literature. Malamud, Bellow, and Baldwin came through honorably if not grandly in their novels. Baldwin's essays and Ellison's *Invisible Man* went further, and adumbrated the new journalism and fiction that followed.

IN POETRY the 40's and 50's embraced a neo-conservatism of form and an emotional solipsism that went beyond that of the novel. The chief technical models, in addition to the 17th-century poets that Eliot had done the most to revive, were Auden and the early Lowell, and the chief theorists were the New Critics. Poets like novelists were retreating from modernism in despair of surpassing it, resuscitating traditional forms as if they were bold new discoveries. Beat poetry, bad as much of it was, made an important break with this constriction of mind, this involution of the self into a distanced object, a well-wrought urn.

One of the New Critics had

erected irony, ambiguity, and paradox into a Holy Trinity of the well-made poem. In this rhetorical hall of mirrors direct self-expression and its complexities counted for little. In *Howl* Ginsberg reached for what critics once called the Sublime, but John Hollander could only see "a hopped-up and improvised tone" which compared poorly with Ginsberg's "profound and carefully organized earlier writing."*

As Paul Zweig has said, "What Ginsberg forced us to understand in *Howl*, twelve years ago, was that nothing is safe from poetry."† It was not only that the world flowed through the poem again in all its variety, but also the spirit that greeted the world turned out to be larger than we remembered, as large as Whitman had boasted, able to contain multitudes. After Ginsberg we knew, but still didn't know that we knew: there was real poetry, and then there was what the Beats were doing, which was fun but wasn't Art.** When Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* came out in 1959—the same year as Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* and Brown's *Life Against Death*—it should have been clear that the game was up: not only was the shape of the poem broken open again, but the self was about to get a new kind of currency that would thrust American literature back into the Romantic mainstream. But some of Lowell's admirers abused his method: where he had been gritty, prosy, and imaginatively personal, they were literal and "confessional," making his

* This astounding and revealing judgment has recently been reiterated by Theodore Roszak in his ignorant treatment of Ginsberg in *The Making of a Counter-Culture*.

† "A Music of Angels," a review of *Planet News* in the *Nation* (March 10, 1969).

** A personal note: the night of the famous Beat reading in McMillin Theatre I instead went downtown with a friend (we were both Columbia sophomores) to a Shakespeare production. A few days later I heard a tape and was sorry. (I caught up with Ginsberg soon afterward when he read and wept through *Kaddis* in a crowded loft above the *Catholic Worker* office.) Still, a choice had been made. It's difficult to recall that culture of the official sort could once be more of a private breakthrough for an eighteen-year-old than the counter-culture.

trionic inventories of their inner lives.

It's IMPORTANT to stress that the main direction of American poetry in the 60's has not been "confessional," as has often been supposed, but toward the same dialectic of fantasy and fact, politics and vision, that has marked the new novel. We have seen the birth of a new surrealism—the intense, vatic, turned-on association-of-images of Ginsberg; the visionary kaleidoscope of Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* songs, much influenced by Ginsberg's style, as by his anger and tenderness; the whimsical surrealism of Kenneth Koch's poems and plays, with their hilarious proportions of scale and their irrepressible, child-like verbosity; the new pastoral poetry of Roethke and his brood, feeling its way back to a new innocence and quietness, exploring the tangled, irrational roots of the self in the landscapes of nature and the mind.

I refer especially to Robert Bly and others loosely associated with him and his magazine *The Sixties*, such as James Wright, David Ignatow, and Galway Kinnell, who seem to me among the most interesting poets writing today. They are Wordsworthians all, seeking the eye of the storm, what Wordsworth in *The Excursion* called

*Authentic tidings of invisible things;
Of ebb and flow, and ever-during power;
And central peace, subsisting at the heart
Of endless agitation.*

It is hardly their fault that the contemporary world and their own burdens of identity within it have turned these men largely into poets of disappointment. It was the pastoral poet in Bly (and a touch of the old public bard) that compelled him to confront the Vietnam war by organizing a massive campaign of readings and even by writing strikingly original political poems,* free of sentimental plati-

tude and direct appeal. Used often on the stump and finally included in *The Light Around the Body* (1967), these poems are angry, charmless mixtures of bizarre fact and surreal metaphor. If the ingredients sometimes fail to coalesce, especially in print, it is nonetheless remarkable that a poet from Minnesota, populistically mistrustful of New York intellectuals, with an unambiguous sense of both his literary vocation and social responsibility, should have brought politics back into poetry, where *Partisan Review* and the New Criticism had so long insisted it could not tread.

When these poets do break through to quietness and "central peace," it is tenuous and fragmentary. The self-accusing serenity that James Wright achieves in the beautiful poems of *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963) is purchased at the expense of all volitional intensity and personal hope. "I have wasted my life," one of them concludes, unexpectedly and matter-of-factly. This mood of resignation makes small epiphanies possible, as when, in the same poem,

*In a field of sunlight between
two pines,
The droppings of last year's
horses
Blaze up into golden stones.*

"Spring Images," which I'll quote in full, is no more than the witness, the enacted process, of three such momentary redemptions, in which perception and language transfigure everyday reality:

*Two athletes
Are dancing in the cathedral
Of the wind,*

*A butterfly lights on the branch
Of your green voice*

*Small antelopes
Fall asleep in the ashes
Of the moon.*

If the imagination's alchemy succeeds for a moment in turning manure into fiery gold, the victory remains a limited one. This is a poetry of failure which also courts failure as poetry. Its purity may be mere constraint, its transfigurations confusions. It is pared down, protectively hunched over; its faults are the opposite of those of Ginsberg, whose expansiveness

often hovers at the edge of rhetoric.

Both poets are in the end saved by their spirituality and their concreteness, qualities rarely found together. The poetry of the 60's could take as its epigraph the words of Jacob Boehme that Bly affixes to the first section of *The Light Around the Body*:

For according to the outward man, we are in this world, and according to the inward man, we are in the inward world. . . . Since then we are generated out of both worlds, we speak in two languages, and we must be understood also by two languages.

The section is called "The Two Worlds," and both Boehme and Bly seem to indicate that they must remain separate. But the experimental literature and social life of the past decade have sought, often futilely, often beautifully, to interanimate them, to capture not only the nimbus but the light *within* the body—without disembodiment.

For this reason I have refrained from emphasizing "the sexual revolution" as the center of the new sensibility. Of all the simplistic explanations of what happened in the 60's, that perhaps does the most violence to what actually occurred—in our art at least, if not in our commerce. Poets as different as Ginsberg and Wright have aimed to make things new again, to see with an innocent eye. This innocence cannot be reduced to Irving Howe's primitivistic "psychology of unobstructed need." It has more to do with the sentences of Boehme and the famous words of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (which develop Plato):

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow clicks of his cavern.

To this one could add the Wordsworthian (and Blakean) sentence of Freud that serves as another epigraph in *The Light Around the Body*: "What a distressing contrast there is between the radiant intelligence of the child, and the feeble mentality of the average adult." To call this a flight from maturity and moral responsibility would be beside the point. It chooses not instinct over consciousness but in-

* Not quite original: Herbert Leibowitz points to the influence of Neruda, whom Bly has frequently praised and translated. Leibowitz's review, which appeared in the *Hudson Review* (Autumn 1968), makes a challenging case for the failure of these poems.

telligence over mentality; these poets have sought new intelligence of the two worlds and the two languages. Their attitude is not based on an indifference to morality but is an attempt to freshen the petrified sources of moral behavior. Mr. Howe defends the encrusted moral mentality of the ages because he feels threatened by what might replace it, or by what might break out if its constraints should weaken. The history of our time makes his qualms understandable, but these constraints *have* weakened; they cannot be restored by sermon or fiat. Nor have Auschwitz and *Heart of Darkness* necessarily said the last word about man.

ALL IN ALL the culture of the 60's has been a liberating one—too liberating, many will say—an opening up, not least through what Blake calls “an improvement of sensual enjoyment.” But Ginsberg, like Blake and Whitman before him, has always enmeshed sexuality in spiritual, political, even cosmic complications. In his *Playboy* interview, Ginsberg describes how his homosexuality, which set him apart from the beginning, not only “served as a catalyst for self-examination,” but contributed to his political consciousness, by making him sensitive to the element of hyper-masculinity and aggressiveness in the American mentality. He revives Whitman's vision of a society whose communal ties are based on a renewal of personal tenderness. And of course he is delighted at “the reappearance in the form of long hair and joyful dress of the affectionate feminine in the natural Adamic man, the whole man, the man of many parts.” In the same vein, at the end of “Who Be Kind To,” he dreams,

*That a new kind of man has
come to his bliss
to end the cold war he has
borne
against his own kind flesh
since the days of the snake.*

At the other extreme from this apocalyptic declaration yet complementing it there is the figure of Ginsberg himself, whom Jane Kramer describes as “a comfortable,

avuncular presence—a rumpled, friendly-looking man with a nice toothy face, big brown owl eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses and a weary, rather affecting slouch.” What made Ginsberg especially important to the youth culture of the 60's was less his mantic ecstasies than the complex generosity of his presence and his values. Just as his poetry encompasses both the visionary Blake and the realistic density of Williams (“no ideas but in things”), so his sympathies embrace and transcend both the hip scene and the New Left. “Put it this way,” Jane Kramer quotes him as saying to a young activist, “the hippies—that is, the psychedelics—have got the consciousness all right, but they have the problem of how to manifest it in the community without risking the pitfalls of a Fascist organization. You people—the radicals—have a real vision of the material and social ills of the society, but you've got pretty much the same problem. The hippies have deeper insight into consciousness, the radicals more information about the workings and the nature of consciousness in the world.”

Call this Romantic socialism, the Romantic vision of the redemption of the self, the libertarian socialist dream of a community of redeemed selves in the real world. This was not a position that Ginsberg achieved easily, as the autobiographical stages of *Planet News* make clear. The book moves from wild and often opaque drug visions to the pivotal 1963 poem “The Change,” which is in the line of the great Romantic poems of crisis and self-recognition. The poem describes a conversion from drugs to selfhood,* from the expansion of consciousness to its concentration on “the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart” to which Yeats reconciled himself at the end of “The Circus Animals' Desertion.” It is this later Ginsberg, *our* Ginsberg, whose warm and chastened voice we hear in the naked language of “Who Be Kind To”:

* Ginsberg has commented fascinatingly on this transformation in his *Paris Review* interview with Tom Clark. See *Writers at Work*, Third Series.

*Be kind to your self, it is only
one
and perishable. . . .
Be kind to the fearful one at your
side
Who's remembering the
Lamentations
of the bible
the prophesies of the Crucified
Adam Son
of all the porters and char
men of
Bell gravia—
Be kind to your self who weep
under
the Moscow moon and hide
your bliss hairs
under raincoat and suede
Levis—
For this is the joy to be born,
the kindness
received through strange eye-
glasses on a bus thru
Kensington. . . .
Be kind to the heroes that have
lost their
names in the newspaper. . . .
And be kind to the poor soul that
cries in
a crack in the pavement be-
cause he
has no body—*

“A little more than kin, and less than kind,” mutters Hamlet, punning bitterly in his first line, when Claudius has addressed him as cousin and son. Ginsberg's poem sets out to bridge this fissure of words and of feelings. Be kind to your self and to others means not only be good to them but also be kin with them, related, natural, close. If Ginsberg's millennial proclamation of “a new kind of man” no longer warring on “his own kind flesh” seems premature, his advocacy of a politics of exorcism, celebration, and public joy rather than violent confrontation looks refreshingly affirmative at this moment. He seeks “a kind of poetry and theater sublime enough to change the national will and open up consciousness in the populace.” Old socialists and New Leftists alike might find this tactically unsound. Still, at a time when many on the Left may face a cul-de-sac of frustration, bitterness, and aggression, Ginsberg's “magic politics,” like his poetry, nurtures a utopian kernel of human dignity and possibility.